DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 416 627 EC 306 178

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TITLE	Increasing the Participation of Students with Disabilities in State and District Assessments.
INSTITUTION	National Center on Educational Outcomes, Minneapolis, MN.
SPONS AGENCY	Special Education Programs (ED/OSERS), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1997-05-00
NOTE	7p.
CONTRACT	H159C50004
AVAILABLE FROM	NCEO, University of Minnesota, 350 Elliott Hall, 75 East River Road, Minneapolis, MN 55455; phone: 612-624-8561; fax: 612-624-0879; World Wide Web: http://www.coled.umn.edu/nceo ($3.50).
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Opinion Papers (120)
JOURNAL CIT	NCEO Policy Directions; n6 May 1997
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Standards; *Accountability; Data Collection; Decision Making; *Disabilities; *Educational Assessment; Educational Principles; Elementary Secondary Education; Graduation Requirements; Inclusive Schools; State School District Relationship; State Standards; Student Evaluation; *Student Participation; *Testing Programs
IDENTIFIERS	*Alternative Assessment; *Testing Accommodations (Disabilities)

ABSTRACT

This report examines issues concerning the participation of students with disabilities in state and district assessments and offers principles and recommendations for increasing their participation. This report suggests that 85 percent of students with disabilities could participate either in the regular assessments or by using accommodations and that only 15 percent might need an alternate assessment. An analysis of state-written guidelines has identified principles such as beginning with the premise that all students will participate in the accountability system and basing participation decisions on the student's instructional goals. The issue of participation in graduation exams is also addressed, with the suggestion that the same principles used in decisions about state assessment and accountability systems be implemented. The report recommends: (1) clarification of the purpose of the assessment and accountability systems; (2) consistency of participation principles for instruction, classroom assessments, and state and district assessments; (3) consistency of accommodations and reporting policies with participation principles; and (4) determination of alternate assessments for those students who need them. (Contains 11 references.) (DB)

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Number 6 May 1997

ED 416 627

Increasing the Participation of Students with Disabilities in State and District Assessments

Background

When students with disabilities are excluded from state and district accountability systems, they do not receive the benefits gained from participation, such as improved instruction, higher expectations, and involvement in educational reforms. In addition, when students do not participate in state and district assessments, policy and instructional decisions are made from incomplete data. In educational systems that rely on student assessment data to determine whether education is working for students — or whether changes in policy and practice are needed — excluded students do not "count."

Many states now agree that it is important to maximize the participation of students with disabilities in statewide assessment and accountability systems. Yet, there are differing perspectives on how best to do this. Some of the questions that need to be answered include:

- Who should participate in regular state and district assessments?
- What principles should guide decisions about who participates in regular state and district assessments?
- What considerations should be given to participation in graduation exams?

Who Should Participate?

All students should be included in educational accountability systems. This includes students with disabilities. Some students with disabilities will participate in the same way as other students; they will take regular state or district tests with no accommodations. Other students with disabilities will participate in regular assessments using accommodations to enable them to demonstrate their skills without the interference of their disabilities (see NCEO Policy Directions 7, *Providing Accommodations for Students in State and District Assessments*). It has been estimated that 85% of students with disabilities could participate in these two ways. We do not yet have a good estimate of how many students need accommodations.

A small percentage of students with disabilities (less than 15% of students with disabilities) may need to participate in an alternate state or district assessment because they are working toward different standards from the majority of

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students (see NCEO Policy Directions 5, *Alternate Assessments for Students with Disabilities*). This small percentage of students should still be part of the overall accountability system even if they do not participate in the regular assessment.

Think about participation in assessments this way: all students should count. For now, consider only those assessments used to document the status of student performance or for school or district accountability scores (i.e., not graduation exams). To start, each student should be given a zero score. This way we know that all students will count. When the student takes the test, the actual score obtained would replace the zero.

For those students who did not take the test, the scores would remain as zeros. This approach encourages decision makers to include students with disabilities whenever possible, and avoids suspicious activities such as:

- Suggesting that students stay at home on the day of the assessment.
- Sending special education classes on field trips or to view a movie on the day of the assessment.
- Discarding the test response forms of students with disabilities.

These and other suspicious practices have happened, and continue to happen, with considerable frequency in many locations.

Principles to Guide Participation Decisions

An analysis of state written guidelines about the participation of students with disabilities in statewide assessments shows many inconsistencies from one state to another. It also reveals that some guidelines include recommendations that serve to discourage the participation of students with disabilities in assessments, while other guidelines include recommendations that serve to encourage participation. Based on this analysis, NCEO developed a list of guiding principles that, when followed, can maximize the participation of students with disabilities in state and district assessments. These principles are summarized below.

▶ Start with the premise that all students are going to participate in the accountability system.

Starting with the assumption that all students are in the accountability system really helps to maximize the participation of students with disabilities. This premise has two parts to it: (1) there is a presumption that all students are in the accountability system, and (2) the presumption is made that nearly all students will participate in the regular assessment, with only a very small number of students being shifted into the alternate assessment. The students in the alternate assessment are still part of the accountability system (see NCEO Policy Directions 5 on alternate assessments).

▶ Base participation decisions on the student's instructional goals and learning characteristics.

The category of a student's disability, the setting in which the student receives instruction, and the percentage of time in a particular classroom should ***not*** be the basis for decisions about participation in assessments.

Student characteristics and the nature of the student's instruction are the important variables to consider. Generally, the guiding principle is that the student should be in the regular assessment if the goals of the student's instruction are consistent with the standards with which the regular assessment is aligned. Expectations that the student will not perform well on an assessment should not be a consideration in the decision.

Any student who is learning the same content or working toward the same goals as other students in the general education classroom, regardless of where the student is receiving instruction, definitely should participate in the regular assessment. Of course, this may shift over time. Elementary-age students, except those with severe cognitive disabilities, will participate in the regular assessment. When in secondary school, however, a small percentage of students who took the regular assessment in elementary school may now be pursuing life skills and vocational training, which typically is not the focus of the state assessment. These students, along with those students with severe cognitive disabilities, will then participate in the alternate assessment.

Whenever a decision is made for a student to participate in an alternate assessment system because the student is pursuing instructional goals different from those of most students, it is best to step back and ask questions about why the student is pursuing different instructional goals. This questioning should be a routine part of the decision-making process.

▶ Have people who know the student make participation decisions.

Because decisions should not be made on the basis of arbitrary criteria, it is essential that decision makers know the student well. Knowing the student well includes knowing about the student's instructional program as well as the student's strengths, weaknesses, and other relevant characteristics. These student-focused characteristics are not necessarily evident from the student's Individualized Educational Program (IEP).

▶ Use a form to guide the decision-making process.

Those people who make decisions about a student's participation in assessments (usually IEP teams) will benefit from being able to follow a form to help guide their decisions. This is because few decision makers have received training on the importance of the participation of students with disabilities in these systems, and may even have been encouraged to exclude them from participation.

Forms to guide participation decisions currently exist in only a few states. Information that might be included on such a form is portrayed in Figure 1.

▶ Document participation decisions.

Decisions about the participation of a student with disabilities in the educational accountability system must be documented in two places: the IEP and in other data bases maintained for the accountability system. Documentation on the IEP is essential because the IEP directs the instructional program of the student. How the student is participating in the accountability system is an important factor in the instructional program. It is also important to document the decision in other data bases maintained for the accountability system. The goal in all cases is to ensure that the system does not lose track of the student. This will enable better calculations of participation rates as well as provide an avenue for reporting data separately for students with disabilities if that is a desired goal (see NCEO Policy Directions 8, *Reporting the Results of Students with Disabilities in State and District Assessments*).

▶ Participation in Graduation Exams

Decisions about participation in graduation exams are much more complicated because these exams have significant consequences for

Figure 1. Form to Guide Participation Decisions

1. Is the student working toward the same standards as other students in the classroom? **[If answer to 1 is YES, student should participate in the regular assessment]**	❑ YES ❑ NO
2. If NO, is the student working on a modified set of standards (many are the same, but some are modified slightly)? **[If answer to 2 is YES, student should participate in the regular assessment]**	❑ YES ❑ NO
3. If NO, is the student working on an alternate set of standards? **[If answer to 3 is YES, student should participate in an alternate assessment]**	❑ YES ❑ NO
4. If the student is working on an alternate set of standards, are there any areas of unique skills that could be assessed through the regular assessment? **[If answer to 4 is YES, student should participate in both the regular and an alternate assessment]**	❑ YES ❑ NO

Note: *This figure is from Thurlow, Elliott, and Ysseldyke (1997, in press). Reprinted with permission from Corwin Press.*

the students who take them, and because state policies vary in significant ways. There are now nearly 20 states that have graduation exams that students must pass, in addition to meeting credit requirements, to receive a high school diploma. Students with disabilities must meet the same requirements, in the same way, as other students in most of these states (see Table 1).

Table 1. States with Graduation Exams

States in Which Students with Disabilities Must Meet the Same Exam Requirements as Other Students to Receive a Regular Diploma	**States in Which Students with Disabilities May Meet Different Exam Requirements from Those That Other Students Must Meet to Receive a Regular Diploma**
Alabama	Minnesota
Arizona	New Jersey
Florida	New Mexico
Georgia	Ohio
Hawaii	Texas
Louisiana	
Maryland	
Massachusetts	
Nevada	
New York	
South Carolina	
Tennessee	
Virginia	

In some states where students with disabilities can receive a regular diploma by satisfying different criteria (usually by meeting their IEP goals and objectives), there have been some unintended consequences of this approach. The most obvious has been increased rates of referral to special education, particularly in grades following those in which the graduation exams are administered. High rates of referral in secondary education are unusual, but this is what was observed in many of the states in which students with disabilities are exempted from graduation exams yet still allowed to receive diplomas.

Perhaps less well documented, but frequently discussed, are the low expectations held for students with disabilities when they are not required to earn diplomas in the same way as other students. This limits the instruction that they are provided in school, and leaves them unprepared for the world of work, in which they generally will have to meet the same expectations as other workers. Furthermore, by not participating in the graduation exams, students are not eligible for the remediation services provided in most states to those who do not initially pass the exam. Court cases have supported the rights of students with disabilities to receive standard diplomas, but only by meeting the same requirements as other students (albeit using assessment accommodations that do not modify the content of the assessments, and given adequate notice of the requirements).

It is suggested here that the principles that guide decisions about participation in graduation exams should be the same as those that guide decisions about state assessment and accountability systems in general. In other words:

Start with the premise that all students striving for a regular high school diploma are going to take the high school graduation exam, with accommodations when needed.
In states where students with disabilities must meet the same standards as other students, the same remedial services and other benefits allowed students without disabilities must be provided to students with disabilities. In states where there currently are exemption policies (i.e., students may be exempted from the exam and still receive a regular diploma), there is a need to:

- **Encourage students with disabilities to participate in graduation exams even if they do not have to, providing them with the assistance needed to be successful.** In this way, educators are held responsible for assisting all students in meeting the goals of education, regardless of whether the students have disabilities.

- **Report publicly on the percentages of students being awarded a high school diploma**

without passing the high school graduation exam. When graduation exams exist in a state, the public wants students to pass them before receiving high school diplomas. High percentages of students earning diplomas by meeting IEP goals rather than passing graduation exams is not desired by the public. By reporting the actual percentages of students earning diplomas in other ways, participation of the largest number of students possible through traditional means will be encouraged.

Recommendations

The context within which an accountability system operates is critical to making policies that work. To align the system with the principles in a particular context, it is best to follow several steps, which are outlined below.

▶ **Clarify the purpose of the assessment and accountability systems, along with beliefs about student learning.**
Begin by clarifying with key stakeholders the beliefs and assumptions that underlie instruction and assessment. Inclusive accountability systems necessarily depend upon a belief that all students can learn and that it is possible to measure the learning of all students.

▶ **Align participation principles for instruction, classroom assessments, and state and district assessments.**
Consistency is essential. If participation is not promoted in all aspects of the educational system (instruction, classroom assessment, state or district assessment), it will be compromised in other systems as well. Participation to the fullest must be required in all aspects of education.

▶ **Align accommodations and reporting policies with participation principles.**
Principles on participation must be carried into policies related to accommodations (see NCEO Policy Directions 7 on accommodations) and reporting (see NCEO Policy Directions 8 on reporting).

▶ **Determine what will be done for those students needing an alternate assessment system.**
Alternate assessments for those students who cannot participate in the regular assessment will need to be developed. This implies that common domains of learning, standards, and measurement procedures will need to be developed as well (see NCEO Policy Directions 5 on alternate assessments).

Including all students in state and district assessment systems is not just about collecting data. Failure to include students with disabilities in assessment and accountability systems leads to failure to assume responsibility for the results of their education. Increasing the participation of students with disabilities in assessments gives benefits to students gained from participation, and provides accurate data for making changes in policy and practice. Following the above recommendations will help ensure that all students "count."

Resources

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About NCEO

The National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) was established in 1990 to provide national leadership in the identification of outcomes and indicators to monitor educational results for all students, including students with disabilities. NCEO addresses the participation of students with disabilities in national and state assessments, standards-setting efforts, and graduation requirements.

The Center represents a collaborative effort of the University of Minnesota, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE).

The Center is supported through a Cooperative Agreement with the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (H159C50004). Opinions or points of view do not necessarily represent those of the U.S. Department of Education or Offices within it.

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NCEO *Policy Directions* is a series of reports that address national policy issues related to students with disabilities. This report was prepared by Martha Thurlow, Jim Ysseldyke, Ron Erickson, and Judy Elliott, with input from many individuals.

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